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**TESTIMONY FOR HB 548/ SB 741 AN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT ACT
OCTOBER 2, 2007**

Good morning, Senator O'Leary, Representative Murphy, and members of the Joint Committee on Higher Education. I am Heidi L. Reed, the Massachusetts Commissioner for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and it is my privilege to oversee the Commission's statewide programs which enable deaf and hard of hearing individuals to have access to information, services, education, and opportunities to live productively, independently, and responsibly as citizens of the Commonwealth. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about proposed legislation to establish a Deaf Studies and American Sign Language Workforce Development initiative.

This testimony is presented to support passage of HB 548, and SB 741, an Act which will authorize the William Hoy Council; a Deaf Studies and Workforce Development Council within MCDHH. This is a vital opportunity for Massachusetts to strengthen its human service workforce with the skills for responding to the needs of adults, children, elders, and minority community members who are Deaf, hard of hearing, and Deaf - Blind.

The proposed council will develop guidelines for the establishment of and continuation of new programs in Deaf Studies and American Sign Language within the Commonwealth's community colleges and state colleges. This statewide workforce development initiative will be accomplished by

- Leveraging existing knowledge and experience within the community college and state college systems,
- By offering accessible and affordable entry points
- By offering transferability and career ladders

- By strengthening links to private universities,
- And by reaching out to youth and others considering human service work.

The Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing supports this legislation for several reasons:

- The Commonwealth is struggling with an ongoing shortage of human service personnel trained in Deaf Studies and American Sign Language and prepared to work with the Deaf community. A statewide plan for Deaf Studies and ASL workforce development will allow the Commonwealth to implement a training system with the capacity to channel graduates into a range of human service career paths relevant to working with and serving the Deaf community.
- There is a statewide lack of affordable and accessible Deaf Studies and American Sign Language programs. Commonwealth agencies have employed Northern Essex Community College (NECC) Deaf Studies Program graduates for their linguistic and sociological skills related to working with deaf adults and children, and for their training as American Sign Language interpreters. NECC is located in a single region of the state and partial community college level training is available in two other regions. The resulting shortage of employment candidates can be addressed through a targeted workforce development initiative.
- With the proposed Act, the Commonwealth has the opportunity to leverage the training program at Northern Essex Community College; a Deaf Studies program that has a history of matching workforce demands with effectively trained graduates. Educational effectiveness within this program is evidenced in that 90% of NECC Deaf Studies graduates taking the MCDH Quality Assurance Screening meet or exceed requirements for working with us as contracted American Sign Language Interpreters.
- Within the American Sign Language interpreter workforce, there is an impending (2008) requirement that candidates for the national certification exam hold an associate's degree, and with a bachelor's degree required beginning in 2012. In the past 25 years, an estimated 300 interpreters graduated with two year degrees from Northern Essex Community College and many continue to work throughout the state. These interpreters will require accessible and affordable options for pursuing the required advanced degree.
- Competition for the finite number of qualified interpreters has increased and has left significant numbers of community interpreting assignments unfilled. MCDH overall statistics reveal that 24-34% of the requests going through our referral office in a given month remain unfilled. More specifically, MCDH interpreter referral statistics reveal that state agencies are increasingly

requesting American Sign Language interpreter services while the availability of interpreters is declining. To illustrate the impact of growing demand for sign language interpreter services, state agencies contacted MCDHH during FY 06 for sign language interpreter services, and 69% of these requests were filled. During the first half of the following year, FY 07, that fill rate for state agency requests dropped to 51%, a significant impact on timely access to services.

- A survey conducted by the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (at Northeastern University) indicates that within the next ten years, retirement will lead to a 22% reduction in the number of the working interpreters who are members of the National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

The proposed Council will convene persons with knowledge and experience to advance a statewide public college and university-based model that is both responsive to workforce needs and affordable to students. **While I unreservedly support this legislation, I am aware, as are the members of this committee, that we may be facing tight budget restrictions again next year and we must all acknowledge that, even for programs and proposals that we think are important, there are fiscal constraints to what we can do. I know that the Administration and I will do everything that it we can to work with the Legislature to find a way to support this program.** Accordingly, I am conveying strong support for the timely and viable Deaf Studies and American Sign Language workforce development initiative proposed by HB 548 and SB 741.